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ABSTRACT

This study investigates middle graders' understanding of significance in United States history through open-ended interviews with 48 students in grades 5-8. Students were presented with a set of captioned historical pictures and asked to choose the one important enough to include on a timeline of the last five hundred years, and to explain their choices. Students' choices focused primarily on the origin and development of the political and social structure of the United States, and their explanations pointed to steadily expanding rights and opportunities as a central theme in U.S. history. At the same time, students had difficulty incorporating some historical patterns and events into their image of progress, and their discussion of these issues indicated a familiarity with a "vernacular" view of history separate from "official" views justifying the contemporary social structure. This study suggests that students need experience with the complexities of the past within a context that provides some framework for making critical sense of both legitimating stories and alternative, vernacular histories. The paper suggests one way to help students build such a framework is by letting them grapple with exactly those issues--race, gender, and class, for example--that have not been so thoroughly digested that their meaning is firmly established in the historical canon. (Contains 36 references.) (Author/EH)

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Middle Graders' Explanations of Historical Significance

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Abstract

In this study, we investigated middle graders' understanding of significance in American history through open–ended interviews with 48 students in grades 5 through 8. Students were presented with a set of captioned historical pictures and asked to choose the ones important enough to include on a timeline of the last five hundred years, and to explain their choices. Students' choices focused primarily on the origin and development of the political and social structure of the United States, and their explanations pointed to steadily expanding rights and opportunities as the central theme in American history. At the same time, students had difficulty incorporating some historical patterns and events into their image of progress, and their discussion of these issues indicated a familiarity with a "vernacular" view of history separate from "official" views justifying the contemporary social structure. This study suggests that students need experience with the complexities of the past within a context that provides some framework for making critical sense out of both legitimating stories and alternative, vernacular histories. We suggest that one way of helping students build such a framework is through letting them grapple with exactly those issues—race, gender, and class, for example—that have not been so thoroughly digested that their meaning is firmly established in the historical canon.

Middle Graders' Explanations of Historical Significance[1]

> That democratic idea (that all are equal in the eyes of God) is one of the grand contributions of the age of Europe even given the imperial expansion, the colonial subjugation of Africa and Asia, the pernicious and vicious crimes against working people and people of color and so forth. So ambiguous a legacy means...we have got to keep two ideas in our minds at the same time. The achievements as well as the downfalls. The grand contributions and the vicious crimes.
>
> Cornel West (cited in Cmiel, 1994, p. 1172)

> To be an American is not ...a matter of blood; it is a matter of an idea—and history is the image of that idea.
>
> Robert Penn Warren (cited in Kammen, 1991, p. 11)

As Robert Penn Warren suggests, "the image of an idea" is integral to the way in which we assign historical significance to people, events and ideas in American history. But the image of the American idea is as much about what is repressed—by whom and to what end—as about what is recollected—by whom and in what context (Cohen, 1994). Multiple—and at times radical—images develop below the surface of official portraits of the past; these ideas exist both within and beyond the boundaries of the "crafts and guilds of historical disciplines" (Cohen, 1994, p.4; Bodnar, 1992; Cuthbertson, 1994). Such alternative and even conflicting images of the past also exist among children, who construct their understanding and representation of history in a complex cultural web of historical images and ideas. In this study we investigate how early adolescents (fifth through eighth grade) evaluate significance in American history, and how they use history to create a sense of collective identity.

Ideas of historical significance are cultural constructs transmitted to members of a society in a variety of ways (Appiah & Gutmann, 1996; Cohen, 1994; Kammen, 1991;

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Seixas, 1994; Shama, 1992). Schooling is one important forum for this transmission—a site where contending forces in the culture try to influence what history will be publicly commemorated. In the U.S., systematic study of American history begins in earnest in fifth grade, is repeated in middle school, and is reintroduced in high school. Of course, schools are not the only sources of children's historical information: family members, the media, historic sites, and museums all present versions of the past both to children and to adults (Barton, 1995; Bodnar, 1992; Cohen, 1994; Levstik and Barton, 1996; Seixas, 1993; Wallace, 1996). Schools are, however, sites where some form of overarching national history is explicitly introduced; indeed, decisions about what aspects of history should be included in the curriculum are hotly contested in American society (Cornbleth and Waugh, 1995). Because of the potential disparity between the versions of history they encounter at school and in the wider society, students may be faced with reconciling widely varied accounts of the past.

Our study focuses not so much on the public debate swirling around these issues as on students' own thinking about what is historically significant. What sense are young people making of the images and ideas about history that they encounter in schools and elsewhere? The process by which students restructure the past involves more than historians' or teachers' stories. It also has to do with students' own ways of conceiving of a "usable" past. In his study of Canadian high school students, for instance, Seixas (1994) noted that students ascribed significance to those events they considered useful in explaining present circumstances or providing a set of lessons to guide present and future behavior. But in another study, Seixas (1997) found that students from diverse ethnic backgrounds sometimes had difficulty co–ordinating their own perspectives on historical significance with those presented in the school curriculum. Similarly, Epstein (1994, 1997) found that many African American high school students' historical understanding stood in active resistance to what they encountered in school; in attempting to create a usable past,

they drew on forms of history presented in what they perceived as more culturally relevant sites—neighborhoods and families. These findings highlight the extent to which understanding history as the image of an idea—or ideas—is both appealing and problematic.

On the one hand, this metaphor of history as the image of an idea suggests that, despite attempts by cultural leaders or authorities to shape a past that maintains the status quo and invests it with powerful emotional appeal, both the image and the idea shift over time. Marginalized people—Native Americans, African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Southern and Central Europeans, women, laborers, and the poor—can enter and alter images long dominated by white, Anglo Saxon propertied males (Kammen, 1991, 1996). On the other hand, the metaphor also suggests a constant struggle for control of the image. If a people's image of their collective history frames their understanding of shared institutions and shapes their sense of identity, it also establishes the boundaries of nations and neighborhoods, recalls some parts of the past and represses others, holds some groups and individuals up for recognition and turns a blind eye to others (Cohen, 1994). For some groups and individuals the struggle is to be *seen* within the historical image. Those whose past has been repressed because it threatens an official national image have a great deal of difficulty entering public memory. Individuals and groups may recall, forget, or repress memories, but the production of *public* memory requires dissemination and some degree of acceptance (Appiah and Gutmann, 1996; Kammen, 1991). Without such acceptance, the experiences of marginalized groups and individuals is unlikely to stand as an effective critique of "official" historical narratives.

The findings of both Seixas (1994, 1997) and Epstein (1994, 1997) reveal the extent to which high school students' understandings of historical significance may diverge from that of the school curriculum and thereby provide alternative perspectives on the meaning of the past. Our study also looks at how a relatively diverse group of students

ascribes significance to ideas, events and people in America's past, but concentrates on students during their first systematic encounters with national history in the intermediate and middle school years. In addition, we try to understand how students mediate the demands of the "official" story of American history and their own, frequently more ambiguous, knowledge of the past. As we analyzed the ways in which these middle grade students talked about history, it became clear that they understood and experienced the past as both "grand contributions" and "vicious crimes," in Cornel West's terms. They considered both elements of history significant, and tied them together with an overarching story of progress and American exceptionality. But while students knew about the events "that they would mention in books or somebody would teach you about," they also were familiar with other perspectives on the past—perspectives that often derived from the experiences and living memories of the people they knew.

Procedure

We developed a semi–structured interview which included both a task requiring students to choose from among a set of twenty captioned historical pictures, and a set of broader questions designed to explore their understanding of historical significance. We interviewed forty–eight students in grades five through eight, and conducted all interviews with single–sex groups of either three or four students; during interviews, students described their identity in terms of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including African American, Native American, various European nationalities, or a mixture of these.[2] All students attended middle schools in central and northern Kentucky; one was in an inner city area, two were rural schools which drew from both rural and suburban populations, and

[2]We used group rather than individual interviews in order to promote discussion and elaboration among students, and we used single–sex groups in order to provide more easily analyzed data on gender differences. Ethnic identification was based on teachers' judgments or students' self–identification.

one was a creative and performing arts magnet school which included students from throughout an urban/suburban region. Pictures and their accompanying captions were designed to activate students' background knowledge and identify consequences of the events depicted, and to avoid overtly biasing students' selections. (Complete captions are included in Appendix A.)

We began interviews by asking students if they were familiar with timelines—all of them were—and explaining that they would be looking through a set of pictures with captions and then working together as a group to decide which eight were important enough to include on a timeline of the last 500 years. We then handed the set of pictures to students and allowed them to work though the task with minimal guidance. (Some groups read the captions carefully, while others skimmed more quickly.) Once students chose eight pictures and placed them on the timeline, we asked them to explain each of their choices, to identify which pictures other people might have chosen (and which they thought no one would have chosen), and to talk about what they had learned about history both in and out of school. In addition to asking questions from our formal protocol, we frequently probed students' responses in order to explore more fully the reasoning behind their answers. (The complete interview protocol is included in Appendix B.)

In addition to tabulating students' choices, we analyzed interview transcripts and drew conclusions from them through a process of analytic induction. After interviewing students, we identified a set of thematic strands in their responses, and we subjected the transcripts to a systematic content analysis in which we categorized responses according to coding categories based on those strands. Many of the initial categories were broken down, combined, or added to during the course of coding, and the coding included a systematic search for negative or discrepant evidence. We then analyzed the coded data using cross-case analysis (in which we grouped the answers of students responding to the same items in the selection task and interview) and constant comparison (in which we compared

students' responses across different portions of the task and interview). This resulted in a set of descriptive generalizations that form the basis for our conclusions, which we describe in the next section.[3]

Results: "Two ideas in our minds"

The past as legitimation for the present

As we have noted, the construction of the past is always a selective process, in which certain people, events, and trends are remembered, emphasized, and even celebrated while others are forgotten, excluded, or de–emphasized. A number of social theorists have argued that this process of selection is invariably tied to the demands of contemporary cultural and social institutions; from such a perspective, those aspects of the past most likely to be considered significant are those which lead to identification with a particular social order and which ratify a community's social and cultural practices. In this view, history has little to do with establishing what happened in the past but everything to do with the promotion of social unity and consensus in the present (Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 1994; Bodnar, 1992; Commager, 1965; Douglas, 1986; Malinowski, 1948; Shils, 1971; Wallace, 1996; Williams, 1977).

Many of students' responses accorded well with this perspective on the function of history in contemporary society. (Overall results are depicted in Table 1, while each group's choices can be found in Appendix D.) Students chose pictures and gave explanations which focused to large extent on the origin and development of the United States as a social and political entity, on the creation and development of what they

[3]During the process of coding and analysis, we explicitly searched for differences in girls' and boys' explanations, and for differences over the course of the four grade levels. With few exceptions, we found neither. As a result, and in the interest of readability, throughout this paper we have chosen examples of responses which represent both sexes and a range of grade levels. Readers who wish to establish the grade level of individual students may refer to Appendix C.

perceived as uniquely American freedoms and opportunities, and on the beneficial effects of technological change. Students generally excluded, on the other hand, pictures of people and events which they recognized as having widespread impact but which they could not assimilate to their image of the country's continuous and beneficial progress.

Table 1

Pictures chosen as historically significant

	Number chosen		
Picture	Girls	Boys	Total
Bill of Rights	7	7	14
American Revolution	7	7	14
Emancipation	6	6	12
World War II	4	6	10
Civil Rights	4	5	9
Edison	5	3	8
Suffrage	4	3	7
Depression	3	4	7
Vietnam	2	4	6
Computers	2	3	5
Immigration	3	1	4
Thanksgiving	2	2	4
Education	3	0	3
Airplane	1	2	3
de Soto	2	1	3
Disease	1	1	2
Car	0	1	1
O. J. Simpson	0	0	0
Elvis Presley	0	0	0
Frontier Life	0	0	0

Note: Only half the students in the study were presented with the "de Soto" picture.

The origin of the United States. Many of students' explanations focused on the origins of the United States and its people. Several groups, for example, noted that the pictures of DeSoto or the "First Thanksgiving" represented the exploration and settlement

of North America; as Brenda explained, the Thanksgiving picture shows "the start of the United States, when we all became possible, because we all came from over there, and a bunch of immigrants came over here, and that's basically how we started our nation."[4] Similarly, many students explained the significance of Ellis Island by noting the role of immigration in shaping the current population of the United States. Megan, for example, considered it important "because we're supposed to be a country made out of a melting pot...And if we didn't have immigration, then we wouldn't have as many people in our country, and that's what makes our country different from other countries. We're not like Germany where you only have German people." Several other groups mentioned the importance of immigration in creating a "melting pot," and some noted—in a very general way—immigrants' cultural contributions to American society.

Students also emphasized national origins in their discussion of the Revolutionary War, which they consistently selected as one of the most important events in American history. Every group placed it among their eight pictures, and they did so automatically, without debate or discussion. In explaining their decision, students pointed primarily to the Revolution's importance in the creation of the United States as a separate country. Amber noted that the American Revolution was important "'cause it recognized the independence of the United States," while Rhiannon explained that it "kinda started our country." Reuben noted that without the American Revolution, "we would have no country," and Chad explained, "we'd still be part of England."[5]

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[4]Interestingly, whenever the name of Christopher Columbus arose, students were quick to point out either that Native Americans already lived in North America or that the Vikings had explored here, and that Columbus could not therefore be considered to have discovered the continent.

[5]Students' explanations often focused not just on the founding of the United States, but more specifically on the conflictual nature of the separation from England. As in previous research (Barton, in press), students sometimes portrayed this conflict in highly personalized terms, as though it were a conflict between individuals rather than political entities. Chelsea, for example, explained that "we didn't want to go by England rules, so we stood up for ourselves," and Christine noted that "everybody like, just fought back." The importance of the English monarch was a key element of such explanations. Ashley, for example, noted that independence was "from the British ruler," and Molly explained that the Revolution "gave them the freedom to do what they liked, so they weren't run by the king."

Students' emphasis on the origins of the United States—both its settlement and its creation as a political unit—reflects the importance of the past in defining a community of identification. Students consistently used the pronouns *our* and *we* in talking about the American Revolution, regardless of their own ethnic background, their gender, or the recency of their families' immigration to the United States. Their explanations suggested that they considered events related to America's creation and settlement important because those events defined the community with which they identified—they outlined the boundaries of who they themselves were. While previous research indicates that children's understanding of the colonial period and the American Revolution is vague, confused, and riddled with misconceptions (Barton, in press; McKeown and Beck, 1990; VanSledright, 1996), students in the present study had internalized the one element of the period that contemporary society considers most important—that this is where *we* began. This sense of continuity over time—the meaningful identification of people in the present with a community that stretches into the past—is one of the key functions of historical memory (Gillis, 1994; Malinowski, 1948; Shils, 1971; Williams, 1977).

American exceptionalism. But students credited the American Revolution with bringing about a number of benefits apart from the simple founding of the country. Megan, for example, suggested that because of the American Revolution, "different immigrants started coming over," and Jessica noted that "everyone could be happy," and that without the Revolution, the country "probably wouldn't be as productive." The most commonly mentioned benefit of the Revolution was freedom. Rhiannon noted that before the Revolution, "we didn't have our rights, we weren't free," and Asher noted that without it, "we wouldn't have freedom." Similarly, Derek suggested that without the Revolution, there would be "probably not as many freedoms…There would probably still be slaves and stuff."

Students further emphasized the importance of "freedom" in their discussion of the creation and extension of political and civil rights. Every group chose the Bill of Rights as one of its eight pictures and pointed to it as the foundation of American freedom; as JaJuan explained, "It gave us all of our freedom and rights," and according to Peter, "If we didn't have the Bill of Rights we wouldn't be as free, the country would be very much, so different." Students particularly emphasized protections of speech, press, and religion. Yolanda, for example, noted that the Bill of Rights was "good, because everybody should be free to have, to what they want to say." Without it, Michelle noted, "we couldn't like go to one of our churches that we go to now," and her interview partner Amber added, "or we couldn't say some things now that we say in the newspaper or something."

Many students explained with conviction that the Bill of Rights set the United States apart from other countries. Megan explained that "unlike other countries we have freedom of speech and other countries didn't have that kind of right, and the Bill of Rights is important because it reassures us that we have these rights and the law cannot take them away from us." Jaclyn also noted that the Bill of Rights is important "to distinguish us from other countries, because we have more freedom than they do," and Rhiannon noted that it was "a big part of why everybody loved America…'cause America's known around the world as the place for freedom." As Lewis explained, "America's known for its freedom and stuff, and I think that's part of what makes it good." Sylvia noted that in other countries, religion and culture tie people together, but in the United States "we don't have that and this Bill is really what holds us together."

In emphasizing American freedom and rights, students were not simply identifying with a community but asserting its moral rightness. As Malinowski (1948) and Shils (1971) note, a society's understanding of its past not only provides a sense of identity but provides a warrant or charter for present practice—it asserts the superiority of present-day institutions. For the students in this study, the Bill of Rights set the United States off as a

uniquely good and moral society, full of inalienable freedoms that no other country has. Their explanations never touched on the specific constitutional issues that animated debates of the period, but once again they had taken away from their studies one significant point—that their country originated in a commitment to rights which remain the envy of the world, which cannot be taken away, and which hold us together.

Progressive expansion of rights, opportunity, and freedom. Students also consistently chose pictures relating to the extension of voting rights and other freedoms. Twelve of the fourteen groups chose the picture depicting the Emancipation Proclamation, ten chose Civil Rights, and seven choose Suffrage (and ten groups chose at least two of these). In each case, students explained their selections by noting the importance of extending rights and freedoms already enjoyed by other Americans. Whitney said that the Emancipation Proclamation was important because "the slaves shouldn't have to be like slaves because of the color of their skin," and Michelle explained that because of it, "nobody would have to like do all the work for no money, and be pushed around like that." As Tiffany noted, "African Americans could still be slaves if we didn't pass that law." Students also pointed to the importance of the suffrage and civil rights movements in making the country more "fair." Dustin, for example, noted that women "should have the right to vote," and Katrina explained that suffrage "gave the other fifty percent of Americans the right to vote." Similarly, Ryan explained that the Civil Rights movement was important "because African Americans were not treated equally," and his interview partner JaJuan agreed that "they need just as much rights as we do."

The progressive development and extension of American freedom and rights was the most frequently mentioned theme in students' responses—regardless of age, gender, or racial and ethnic background—and many students consciously and explicitly described such events as part of an ongoing and significant process in American history. Nicole, for example, noted that the Emancipation Proclamation was "another step towards freedom,"

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and her partners suggested that it "helped enforce" the Bill of Rights. Megan also explained that "the Constitution says that all people are equal," and that the Emancipation Proclamation "made it all true because before that they were slaves and didn't have privileges like white people do." Chad, meanwhile, explained that suffrage was "kinda like" the Emancipation Proclamation for women, "'cause this was when they were like being equal to the men." And Sonja explained that the civil rights movement was important because it was "the last *major* group of people that hadn't gotten their rights." Amber suggested that the most important thing she'd learned about history at school was "the rights of the people that were back then, that they had to fight for to get, and how we have so much freedom now, and they hardly had any back in the 1900s, or 1800s."

Students often described such events in terms not only of fairness or freedom but also of their contribution to the improvement of social relations. Rachel, for example, suggested that the Thanksgiving picture was important because "it was kind of like the beginning of us becoming friends," and Yolanda also noted that "we was making a bond with Native Americans; that's good because that's a tradition that goes on forever." Several students described the importance of the civil rights movement in similar terms. Lewis explained that it was important "because it shows that we can try to achieve goals peacefully instead of always having to fight"; as Yolanda noted, it allowed people to "rise up above the hatred," and that "they found out that white and black people can get along great, and they have a lot of things in common." Several students even credited the Civil War with improving social relations. Brenda thought it was important because "it showed us how we can become a nation together; we do have our problems, but we can solve the problems." And Ron noted that when Abraham Lincoln ended slavery, "that was really important. Now we are like all together, and we don't fight any more. Not as much."

A related theme in students' responses was the development of individual opportunity. Rhiannon, for example, described the suffrage movement as important

because it led to women's working and having jobs. Similarly, Donny noted that the civil rights movement was important because it gave African Americans "a lot of opportunity to get jobs and stuff because they weren't really recognized as people." Students' emphasis on opportunity was even more pronounced in their discussions of the development of education. Although only three groups included it as one of their final choices, many students nonetheless pointed to its significance. Tiffany, for example, noted that education not only leads to inventions, but allows us to "choose our careers for the future." Similarly, Brenda noted that "if it wasn't for the first school, we wouldn't get anywhere in the world."

Students' emphasis on the expansion of rights and opportunities and the steady improvement of social relations reveals their concern with establishing that the United States is a country in which historic hardships and injustices are corrected and overcome. The legitimating function of history is particularly important in societies in which contemporary groups experience wide differences in their economic or social status, for such circumstances call for explanations that establish the legitimacy of the status quo (Bodnar, 1994; Malinowski, 1948). While the students in this study did not use the past to justify current inequalities, they did use the extension of rights and opportunities as a way of demonstrating that such inequalities are bound to be overcome (or that they already have been), and they consciously and reflectively considered such progress to be the dominant theme in American history.

Technological progress. Students' concern with progress was also evident in their explanations of pictures representing technological change. Ten of the fourteen groups chose pictures either of Thomas Edison or the computer, and their explanations pointed to the importance of inventions in making contemporary life possible. As Yolanda noted, Thomas Edison is important "because we use his inventions every day." Leslie also noted, "the light bulb is necessary for today," and Rachel explained that without the light bulb,

"we would have been like in the stone age." Similarly, Jaclyn noted that the computer "has really changed things, 'cause you don't have to write things, you can just type them on a computer and print it out." Brandon suggested that "our whole life revolves around computers," and Reuben explained that "everything in the world now, just about, is run by them." Students selected pictures of the airplane and the car far less often, but their explanations of those inventions also pointed to their importance in shaping modern life. Jaclyn, for example, noted that without the car, "We wouldn't be able to like travel, hardly at all, we would have to walk," and Cole explained that airplanes are important because "people need to get around faster than walking."

Students' universally positive regard for such technological changes indicates the extent to which their progressive view of history excluded the consideration of alternatives. Shils (1971) notes that members of a society typically accept the past as a "given," in which "incongruent alternatives are not so much deliberately rejected as scarcely perceived" (p. 140). Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent in our society than in the belief in technological progress; most of us consider electricity and even computers so much a given that we have difficulty imagining that their invention could be regarded as anything other than an advance. But Wallace (1996) has shown how individuals and institutions have deliberately shaped such perceptions, and how the drawbacks and social consequences of technological change have been excluded from popular understanding. Not surprisingly, the students in this study invariably pointed to the positive effects of technological changes and their role in making contemporary life possible, and rarely mentioned the relationship between technology and pollution, the consumption of resources, or patterns of labor. The benefits of technological development were as self–evident to them as the extension of civil and political rights.

Change and controversy . Students' emphasis on the progressive development of contemporary American society was also evident in the pictures they rejected. There were

three pictures no group selected, and many students explained that two of these could not reasonably be considered among the most important events in American history—Elvis Presley and O. J. Simpson.[6] During their initial sorting of the pictures, students rejected these pictures immediately, often laughing as soon as they saw them. While many students described Elvis Presley's influence on music, they rejected his historical significance. Yolanda pointed out that Elvis "didn't do anything for the country, to make history," and Rachel noted that "it doesn't change America much." J. R. also noted, "It's just like media, it might have affected us, 'cause he might have started rock and roll and all that stuff, but it probably wouldn't affect half the population." (Only Briana pointed to the importance of such cultural changes in noting that the Elvis picture might be a reasonable choice because "it's sort of a start of our culture, and it shows how much things have changed and everything.") For most students, simple *changes* in culture—as opposed to *advances* in freedom or technology—were insufficient to qualify as historically significant.

Students were also well aware of the controversy surrounding the O. J. Simpson trial, but few thought this was a matter of historical significance. Tiffany, for example, said that Simpson "has nothing to do with anything today," and her interview partner Briana agreed that "it's not a main issue." Lewis noted that "it just kept people suspended for a while, but really, it'll be forgotten pretty soon." No student argued for its inclusion on the basis of its representation of contemporary race relations, although some suggested that others might reasonably have done so. (It should be noted, however, that all students who explicitly denied its importance came from schools which had almost exclusively European American students; students in schools with mixed ethnic populations either ignored the picture or suggested that others might have chosen it as important.) Again, students did not perceive the trial as leading to any advances in society, and rejected it as being of historical

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[6]Although no students chose the picture of Frontier Life, several thought that others might reasonably have chosen it, and no student explicitly denied that it could be considered one of the most important pictures.

significance. Neither Elvis Presley nor O. J. Simpson helped students establish themselves as part of a just and progressive nation.

War. Students' concern with constructing a narrative of American progress was also apparent in their discussion of war. They certainly considered wars important, and they often said so; Nicole, for example, suggested that the Vietnam picture must be important, "because it's a war," and Ryan also noted that some people might have chosen it "because it's a war, and all wars are important." As Rhiannon noted, wars "are a big part of history because everyone remembers wars."[7] At the same time, however, students had to align their recognition that wars are invariably important with their belief in progress. The American Revolution and the Civil War presented no problems: the former led to freedom, the latter to the end of slavery and the reuniting of the nation. But while many students considered World War II and the Vietnam War important (eleven groups chose at least one of the two), they struggled to find an explanation of their significance that accorded with their image of progress. Some students suggested that World War II was important because it ended the Holocaust or prevented the extension of Hitler's power, but others looked for a more specifically American connection—and in discussing Vietnam, students framed its importance exclusively in terms of the United States.

While the patterns in students' explanations of Vietnam and World War II are not as clear and consistent as in their discussion of other pictures, two themes stand out. First, some students noted that these wars demonstrated once again America's moral superiority. Byron, for example, explained that World War II was important because "it showed that America was a great world power," and that "we stand up for people"; his interview partner

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[7]In previous research (Barton and Levstik, 1996) we found that students from the primary years through sixth grade considered wars a salient but confusing aspect of history; while they often pointed to their importance, they rarely identified the issues (or the warring sides) in any but the most general terms. Students in the present study were much more capable of explaining specific details of wars, but their answers also reflected a belief in their significance which was strongly held but not always clearly or consistently articulated.

added that "it showed that like you don't mess with America." Similarly, Rhiannon thought that in World War II, "we were just basically helping other countries," and also that we were fighting the Vietnam war "for the Vietnamese people." Other students, however, sought to relate these wars not to the country's inherent superiority but to its ability to learn from its mistakes. Reuben, for example, said that Vietnam "taught us that we weren't invincible, that there are other people who are willing to give up more than us to get what they needed," while Chad suggested that Vietnam taught us that we "shouldn't go slowly into a war," and that we shouldn't "waste men just trying to decide." (Fred, on the other hand, thought that both wars taught the United States that "there are other people in the world and they have ideas too.") Donny summed up this view by noting that wars are important to study "because like the mistakes you made in a war and stuff so it doesn't happen again."

Although these sets of explanations regarding war differed in their content, both reveal the extent to which students attempted to assimilate their knowledge of history to a view of the past that provided legitimation for the contemporary society of which they considered themselves a part. Some students described the significance of Vietnam and World War II in terms of their conception of the United States as a uniquely moral and just society—an extension of their focus on the development of American freedom and rights. Others justified these wars by pointing to the lessons that were learned—an extension of perception of American history as the story of unfolding progress, a story in which all developments lead to a better future. And students' emphasis on the impact of war on the United States—rather than in a global context—indicates the extent to which their frame of reference was the national community, as they had first made clear in their concern with events related to the settlement of North America and the creation of the United States as a political entity.

Vernacular history: Coping with ambiguity

Next to the unifying and legitimating framework already described students maintained an alternative story in which the promise of the Bill of Rights was thwarted. All students knew from personal experience that prejudice existed despite the ideal of equality, that sexism existed despite the extension of political rights, and that some events could not be reconciled with images of progress. Scholars investigating "collective memory" note that such progressive and legitimating historical perspectives are not the only available views of the past. Bodnar (1992), for example, points to the existence of a "vernacular" culture which stands in contrast to "official" versions of history. Unlike official histories based on the "imagined communities of a large nation," vernacular histories derive from lived experience in specific and generally small–scale communities. They often arise from the perception on the part of community members that their values and first–hand experiences are ignored or discounted. Also unlike the patriotic and nationalistic views of history promoted in official culture, "vernacular expressions convey what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like" (p. 14). As Seixas (1997) and Epstein (1994, 1997) found, students' understanding of and identification with vernacular history can put them in conflict with the history presented in the school curriculum.

Making sense of children's historical understanding, then, involves more than identifying what children take to be the central ideas of history; it also involves analyzing how children *apply* those central ideas to different aspects of the past—particularly those events which cannot easily be assimilated to a story of progress and exceptionality (Appiah & Gutmann, 1996). What happens, for instance, when "official" history and personal experience offer conflicting perspectives? What happens, too, when students perceive the historical record to be ambiguous—when people either resist learning from the past or cannot figure out what the past means? In this section, we look at how students tried to

make sense of situations that were, from their perspective, more ambiguous than a story of steadily expanding progress.

Racism. As we have noted, students sought to fit events such as the Civil Rights movement into a framework of progress and reconciliation. In general, dissent and oppression were flattened in their discussions: As students usually explained it, rights were given, not wrested from a resistant society. Oppressed or disfranchised people noticed that they did not have the same rights as others, asked for amelioration, redress was granted (or was in process), and reconciliation followed. They were aware that some violence occurred—they knew about assassinations, for instance—but they rarely described any forms of civil disobedience or long–term protest. Some events and issues presented more challenge to this schema of on–going reconciliation than others, however. Continuing racism was one of these issues.

For European American students the continuation of racism was a puzzle. African Americans "have rights," Rhiannon said, pondering the problem; Sonja agreed, but noted that "we still have prejudice." "Yeah," Rhiannon acknowledged, "There's still prejudice...and there are even like other religious groups and other different countries that...have prejudice, too. Even if everybody has the *right*, doesn't change people's emotions." She and Sonja continued to turn the idea around, suggesting that recent immigrants seemed to be treated most badly. Rhiannon said, "illegal—not illegal, but aliens—that have just come here like Puerto Ricans and Mexicans...they came here but they're legally allowed to be here, but people think they're like taking our taxes and taking all our government stuff that would go to them." Another group of girls also mentioned hostility towards recent immigrants, noting that California was involved in "making laws" about immigration. As they discussed this disjuncture between progress and prejudice, Rachel mentioned that "people think of America as the land of opportunities but I don't think they think of racism."

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As Rachel's remark indicates, there was some recognition among European American students that the history of expanding opportunities was neither smooth, uninterrupted nor finished. This was particularly apparent as students discussed the picture of a Civil Rights march led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Several of the eighth grade boys said that King was a hero—"in our eyes," Byron concluded, then amended, "or, at least in my eyes." Tony interjected that "I would not do that [march in a protest] if it was all a black community. Say we're like a family of whites and they treated us the way we treated them. I'd be quiet." When asked if he meant that he would be afraid to do what King had done, Tony responded, "Yeah!" Later, he expanded on his concern: "Although [African Americans] got to be free we still kinda pushed 'em...we still gave them the cheap neighborhoods so they didn't live with us." Lincoln added, "kind of like the Indians...and the voting thing for women." "We said hey, they're here, pfft," Byron said, gesturing as if brushing them out of the way. Similarly, Saara pointed out, "Some places are going back to segregation. I think it's sad. It took such a long time to get it the way it is now." Rachel nodded and commented, "It's not perfect, not where we want to be."

African American students also framed the past as a story of learning from mistakes, they but sometimes introduced a more complex analysis of progress in extending rights to marginalized people. Isabella was particularly articulate in her commentary. She argued that while there had been progress—people of African descent on U.S. Olympic teams, her own presence in an integrated school—the problems that remained were daunting. She explained that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was important because it "helped towards freeing the slaves...he didn't actually do it by himself. Other people helped...but a lot of people remain racist, and even today in a lot of places, like in Mississippi, the schools are still segregated. And even now you see things about the KKK. They even have their own program on the Internet. Its like you could go anywhere [but] you wouldn't be accepted, [and] even if you were accepted you wouldn't go." The Bill of

Rights, she argued, was "only for rich white men who could vote and you had to pay taxes... so the Bill of Rights just protected wealthy, white, male landowners, but that [Civil Rights] applied to everyone and gave everyone a chance."

Isabella also provided an alternative interpretation to the story of co-operation between white settlers and Native Americans. After her classmate Sylvia, a European American, commented that DeSoto was important because the Spaniards "had children and their children had children, and they spread out, and some are here," Isabella added, "And the Indians, that's sort of when they broke up the peace treaties, they just went away and disappeared. I think, even now [Native Americans] set up their own organizations and some don't trust people and they really have to know you for a long time to trust you—to like want you on their land." Later, Isabella expanded on her vision of American history, identifying at least one source for her perspective. Martin Luther King "went to jail, preached and influenced people like Rosa Parks," she began, looking at the picture of King leading the Civil Rights march. "I saw *Ghost of Mississippi.* It was about another Civil Rights worker, Medgar [Evers]. He was also a Civil Rights leader. People don't know any other people." She went on to raise the issue of police treatment of African Americans in the local community, comparing a recent well-publicized incident to the O. J. Simpson trials: "I think that even though they had some evidence they immediately pinned it on him," she said of Simpson. "And they didn't actually check on her background to see if people had threatened her in the past....I don't think anybody should think they know because they don't, they only know who made phone calls and they don't know anything else except what was in the tabloids."[8] Later, commenting on the significance of the Civil

[8]In the local community, an African American teenager was shot to death by a police officer. The young man had his hands above his head when he was shot. A court of inquiry found the officer had accidentally discharged his weapon. A protest march, described in the media as a "riot," followed the shooting. The incident was the catalyst for several community efforts to establish better communication about issues of race, but the fact that all the children in the discussion group were familiar with the event two years after its occurrence points out the emotional weight of the incident in the community. At a local level it had some of the same impact as the Simpson trial had nationally.

Rights movement, Isabella noted that "you don't really learn about [Civil Rights] in school. You know I've read books about it. My parents have books and I've gone to the library and I've seen movies and stuff and I mean at this school and at my other school I didn't learn too much about it 'cause like you celebrate Martin Luther King but you don't hear about it…you just hear that he helped."

Isabella's powerful vernacular history, nurtured by her family and enriched by her own interests, allowed her to offer an alternative to the official story that she found in her schooling. Not all students of color were as outspoken as Isabella, however. Sometimes, when a European American student argued that "we're all equal now" a student of color would drop out of the conversation, at least temporarily. In one instance, Robert, a European American, remarked that one of the results of racism was that "most black people are poor and on free or reduced lunches like 93% or so." Derek, his African American classmate, looked at him in surprise, pointing a finger at his own chest and shaking his head. He stayed silent, however, until the conversation shifted to Native Americans. This time, when Robert said that Columbus discovered America, Derek leaned forward and asked, "How did he discover America? There were already people here!" Oliver, a European American, intervened, saying "they didn't know where the U.S. was; since they didn't know it, it was a discovery [for them], but not for the Indians." Again, Derek withdrew, shaking his head. Similarly, when the eighth grade girls discussed recent immigration from "Puerto Rico and Mexico," Patricia, whose father was Mexican American, remained silent during the discussion of legal and illegal immigration, re-entering the conversation at a later point to discuss ethnic contributions—food—to American culture. Her classmate Saara, an immigrant from Poland, however, intervened when Rhiannon joked that Saara was an "illegal alien." Saara forcefully explained that she was legal and had a green card—"actually, a *pink* green card."

In these conversations African American and European American students negotiated their places in American history, drawing on what they learned in school, but also on things learned outside of school. When asked what kinds of history they learned outside of school, Megan, who described her heritage as Irish and Indian (Native American) said, "Like where I come from." Her classmate Miatta, whose family included both African Americans and Native Americans, said, "That's important to me. That's how I learned about Native Americans." Jared also learned "a lot about black history" at home. Jessica explained that her family's stories about their past helped her understand why "we do things differently at Christmas because of our history." Brandon learned about farming in the past, because "my grandpa and grandma live on a farm." Patricia, who described herself as Mexican and Italian, remembered learning about "different languages and stuff and so maybe there's things we mix in [to school history]." Fred learned "a lot about present day history. My dad's a real strong Republican, so I've learned a lot about politics from him." Lewis laughed, remembering learning "too much about the Cherokees' weather predicting" from his Cherokee relatives. To some extent, then, students across grade levels saw history as fixing their own experience in the constellation of possibilities in the world (Holt, 1990). While some form of collective history was learned in school, other, more personal histories were learned outside of school. Some of these personal histories simply embellished on what was learned in school; others, however, provided a counterpoint to official school history.

The Great Depression. Race and ethnicity were not the only issues that sometimes challenged students' historical schema of progress over time. Other events whose moral underpinnings were ambiguous were often confusing—and generally interesting. As one group of girls considered the photograph of the Great Depression, for instance, they indicated that it was "really important." Rhiannon said that "like everybody's grandparents, like you always hear people talking." "It wasn't a good part of history," Sonja added.

Patricia said "it was something to learn from." When asked *what* was to be learned from this event, however, they struggled to explain. "Like, that, um..." Sonja looked to her classmates for help. "We should...?" All four girls began laughing. Rhiannon explained, "We don't know how it started so we like haven't studied it. We've heard about it every other place." Kathy added that, "I've only heard about the Depression, how bad it was, but that's about it. They didn't tell why it was bad, like what made it, and what people had to go through, things like that."

While students were often unsure exactly what lesson could be learned from this historical era, they thought that it had something to do with economics, and the need for government. Chad, for instance, thought that the Depression "was the first time our country had become really poor." The other lesson learned, however, was that national hubris is likely to be punished. J. R. decided that the Depression " just changed the country so much. They realized that they weren't the god of all countries." Byron thought that another lesson might be that "its not going to be perfect all the time." "Yeah," Tony agreed. "We think our country's perfect—so great!" Thomas added that "we take it for granted."

Given that none of the students reported studying the Depression (although about half said they had seen films from the era in a humanities class) they had accumulated an interesting array of conceptions and misconceptions about it. They knew bad things had happened, though they thought they had happened fairly uniformly to all Americans.[9] They also had some idea that government had intervened to try to correct the problem. Finally, they were also fairly sure that bad things did not happen without a reason. They had no knowledge of any other economic declines in American history; as far as they knew their

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[9]Interestingly, in writing about the Great Depression, Kammen (1991) discusses the repression of memory about the Depression among adult Americans, noting that "life histories recorded by the Federal Writers' Project reveal the extent to which activist women were omitted from both personal and public memories of the labor union movement.... [There was] a tendency for working class as well as middle-class people to repress or even genuinely forget particulars of the prolonged and problematic period they had lived through" (p. 503).

country had, with this one exception, been uniformly wealthy. Like a figure from mythology, however, America confused itself with the divine. It saw itself as the "god of countries" and was punished for its hubris. America, some students concluded, should be more humble in its prosperity. They were less sure, however, about exactly how that might be done and thought that it was something they would learn if they ever got the chance to study the Depression.

The Vietnam War. The Vietnam War presented students with even greater challenges. While some of the students simply assigned significance to Vietnam because it was a war and "all wars are important," none of the students crafted what they knew about this war into a cohesive narrative. Most found the Vietnam War interesting and confusing. Yolanda tried to explain her confusion. On the one hand it seemed to her that the involvement of U.S. citizens should be recognized "because all the people in there were, like, very sad." On the other hand, "all the people that died" seemed a high price to pay for a lost war. The war challenged students' conceptions of history and historical significance on several levels. First, it called into question their ideas about American exceptionality. As we noted, students thought that Americans were different in that they did not fight wars of aggression. With the exception of the American Revolution and the Civil War which were "our wars," Americans went to war to "help people…we were fighting…for other people." Two groups of students were so convinced that Americans only went to war to help others that they insisted that all wars other than the Revolution and Civil War were "not really our wars" and therefore not significant to American history. They could not, however, reconcile what they knew about Vietnam with this view. They weren't sure who Americans were helping in Vietnam. Rhiannon struggled to explain who America was fighting. "The Vietnamese people," she finally declared. When asked *which* Vietnamese people she hesitated. "North or south?" she asked, laughing. Sonja volunteered that she thought "it was like a civil war between like Vietnam, I think." Lewis speculated that the war "helped

Vietnam be different. Well, it helped the north and south or something." His classmate Peter shrugged and said that "I don't really know much about the Vietnam War." After listening to his peers struggle for awhile, Jared commented that "they're trying to make excuses for a war we lost."

Certainly students at each grade level understood the outcome of the Vietnam War as a loss for America, and most mentioned that it was the only war America ever lost. As already noted, many students tried to discover a lesson in that defeat—thus Briana suggested that "we can't expect our army to win every time, because they're only as human as we are," and another student concluded that "if they're going to go communist, let them…we should stay out of their business." Clearly, the lessons to be learned from Vietnam were still fluid: There was no single interpretation that seemed to override others, no framework provided by school or home. In fact, the one consistent source of information on Vietnam (mentioned by all but two groups) was the movie *Forrest Gump.*

Sources such as *Forrest Gump* did little to help students understand the second feature of the Vietnam War that confused them—anti-war protests. The protests surrounding American involvement in Vietnam made no sense to them. To begin with, protest challenged their schema of cooperation and reconciliation. Why, they wondered, did people object to helping another country? Isabella wanted to know "how [the war] was started and why some of the best people were against it. I mean to me, I want to know why they were against the Vietnamese people." Lincoln offered the conclusion that "people were going mad." Oliver, Jacob and Robert thought that more people died in Vietnam because "you have all these shootings because people in the U.S. were arguing over something," but they were unclear as to what the argument was about. They had no inkling that war resistance was a regular feature of America's history; so far as they knew, Vietnam was a singular incident of dissent. When the master narrative of American history is one of progress, alternative perspectives can scarcely be perceived as needed, much less as

positive—small wonder, then, that students saw dissent as evidence of failure and were confused as to what lessons they should take from the war. "Disagreement," Jaclyn said, "can lead to such a big conflict that could have been solved a lot easier."

Perhaps because their major sources of information on dissent touched largely on the experiences of returning veterans, students also seemed to view the protesters as the cause of conflict. They reported little formal instruction about the history of the Vietnam War, but someone at each grade level had personal experience with Vietnam veterans. Megan's father and uncle, for example, both fought in Vietnam; her father's best friend, she said, "got killed standing right next to him." When her father and uncle came home they were met by protesters. Others knew fathers, grandfathers, friends and relatives who had fought in Vietnam, and several reported having heard a Vietnam veteran speak in school; one seventh grader wore an MIA bracelet purchased while on a school visit to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. If there were similar connections to war protesters they either did not share these or did not know about them. Tiffany summed up most of what they knew about protests: "When the soldiers came back, they weren't looked upon very nicely."

Vietnam was clearly one historical event within the living memory of people they knew and cared about. Participants in the conflict could be called into mind or described in anecdote. Megan recalled a "girl last year, her father used to parachute into the jungle and he'd be shot at." Patricia told about her grandfather whose plane was shot down "and he was in a camp for a year and they knocked out all his teeth." Jessica's grandfather, meanwhile, "flew planes and he dropped bombs and he wrote poems about it, too. And he said it would be just little dots of people falling over. He didn't like doing that because he could just see people falling but he didn't know which side they were on. They just kept falling down." As Loewen (1995) notes, there is an important distinction between history held in living memory and history beyond the memory of anyone living. For these children

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the connection was even more immediate. Those who held significant parts of the past in living memory were in personal communication with the students. They provided both their own interpretations of the past and commentary on the interpretations of others. They could claim—and children could believe—that this first hand knowledge was more accurate than any public report (and it may well have been). As a result, official interpretations of these events were not the only or even most significant interpretation available to the students. The Depression was distant enough that they seemed to trust that with a little more study they could understand it. Vietnam was immediate enough that they were less sure of what they might learn. As Isabella explained, "I want to know how it was started and why some of the best people were against it. I mean like to me, I want to know why they were against the Vietnamese people."

Even within the wider culture, the public history of Vietnam is still in process. As Kammen (1991) notes, books, films and other media are creating "a new mythology in which the U.S. government disappears as a devastating force, the Vietnamese people cease to be victims, and the principal focus of concern becomes psychic stress for those veterans who survived..." (p. 657). We might add that the anti-war movement also disappears except as a footnote explaining hostility towards veterans. Little wonder then, that the students in our study wanted to know why protesters "were against the Vietnamese people," and were confused about what help the Vietnamese people sought.

Suffrage. Women's suffrage presented a different set of issues for the students. First, while voting did not strike most of the students—boys or girls—as controversial, they knew little about the degree of violence that accompanied the suffrage movement for women. One male student explicitly compared violence against African Americans—"they got like beat and stuff"—with the comparative safety of women who were told, "like just go get in your house and stay there." Second, while suffrage was distant in time from them, women's rights were not. Just as they knew about Vietnam through personal

experience with veterans, they knew about issues related to women's rights because those issues played out in the immediate environment of home and school. When Saara argued that males would be as likely to think women's suffrage was important as females, she called on her knowledge of her father: "I know my dad would have picked that," she said. Her classmate Rachel agreed that adult men might pick it, but told Saara to remember that "this is the boys in *this school!*" Similarly, Lincoln looked over the pictures on the timeline and decided that "knowing some of the girls we know, they may not like that [picture] because its *all* men."

Even though male and female students were about equally likely to identify women's suffrage as one of the eight most significant events to put on their timeline, they were also equally likely to say that their opposite sex peers would view this event differently. Male students generally insisted that females would put women's suffrage on the timeline; female students were sure males would not. Those who were sure that men and women thought differently generally agreed with Oliver that, "If just men got to vote it would probably change things because we're a lot different, you know. [Women] think differently." Megan and Jessica agreed that "women have different perspectives" and Tania added that, as a result, they voted differently "because different candidates have different ideas." Other students argued that there were few real differences in the way each gender thought about history. As Fred said, "really, we're not all that different…its not like girls have cooties. I think they think pretty much alike." Tony insisted that "they'll pick the same things we did," and Byron added that "it has a lot to do with the age instead of the gender." Jaclyn thought that "it depends on who it is" not on whether the person was male or female.

Even though they were aware of some of the gender differences apparent in their own experience, and whether they argued that men and women were inherently different or more alike than different, students could usually fit women's rights into their framework of

progress. If they began from a perspective of difference, they generally advanced an argument for complementarity. Patricia explained that "you have two different sexes, they see different qualities in each [candidate], so maybe they can choose a better one…together." Tiffany mentioned that extending suffrage "led to more competition between candidates." Oliver noted that, if women got the vote "the whole country would say like I want *this* president." Robert added that "some people aim on different things, and if one person aimed on one thing, the others wouldn't get what they want."

If they began from a perspective of similarity, students generally advanced an argument for fairness and shared authority or power. Megan noted that prior to women's suffrage, "men had all the authority and [the vote] kind of gave women some authority." "And," Tania added, "if women are going to live here, they should get some of the authority." Jessica agreed, suggesting that women "should be allowed to elect whoever is going to lead them, not just their husbands and everything." Prior to suffrage, they said, men predominated. "Women wanted like to more to do stuff," Tania explained. "When they got to vote, they got to vote for who they thought was best." Jessica added that "they got to share their ideas." Isabella said that "because women and men have equal rights, they should have a say in what happens to them and what affects their life, too." Saara nodded, adding that "the emancipation proclamation sort of represents that."

Boys agreed that women should share power. Lincoln, for instance, began by arguing the importance of women's suffrage because "for a long time it was just white male landowners" who had power. Tony added that getting the vote "shows that you belong," then paused, pondering, " not *belong* to the country." His classmate amplified, "But *own* the country." Tony agreed, concluding that participating in deciding on "what happens in the country makes you equal." "Well," Lincoln interjected, "it helps. I mean you're saying you're just as important as a white male landowner." Byron intervened, "as long as you have the same amount of votes." Lincoln nodded, "Yeah, more women vote." "I think,"

Byron said, "men take it for granted though cause they've always had it and women are , 'oh, gotta vote 'cause its our constitutional right!'"

When asked if women's votes had ever changed an election, most of the students said yes, though only a couple could offer specific examples. Megan noted that "one of the Republicans [in the 1996 presidential race] said women should just stay home and not work and just kinda take care of kids and stuff like that." Rhiannon made similar comments, adding that women noticed different qualities in a candidate: "I think women would vote for Clinton because Bob Dole, he was really hard. He seemed like he was not very caring or even nice." Her explanation led to a chorus of agreement from her classmates.

Overall, then, male and female students thought that women's suffrage was evidence of progress. But they were less sure about other aspects of women's rights, especially as they grappled with them in personal interactions. They could still make what they knew fit the outline of progress—women got the vote, after all—but it was a different kind of progress than the image that seemed to attach to other aspects of civil rights history. In discussing immigrants or African Americans the students generally described progress from an inclusivist perspective: the Bill of Rights established the parameters of what it meant to be an American. Progress involved extending those rights to those who were initially excluded from full participation. Progress meant opening the doors wider and inviting more people to become part of "us." Women, however, presented a different problem. European American women were already part of the mainstream culture—they were "us." At some level, the issue was not that women needed to be included so much as they needed to be recognized as separate and independent and able to exercise power and authority in the culture. Thus, while students talked about immigrants becoming "part of us," they talked about women complementing men—they were the other half of the image

of "us." In neither case, however, did students propose radically altering the "us" to better accommodate newcomers.

Conclusions

While the past and its attendant traditions can be interesting in their own right, history serves functions beyond antiquarian interests. History matters politically. By directing attention to real or imagined connections between past and present, history is invoked to legitimate the social order, to bind otherwise disparate people together, or to rally support for social change. Thus the political and social values of a people are shaped by their sense of history—by the official history commemorated in various ways in the society and by the vernacular histories that explain alternative social realities. Such social uses of the past were apparent in the responses of the students in this research.

Most students described little difference between official and vernacular histories. They began with the assumption that the "grand contributions" outlined in the Bill of Rights were worth preserving and sharing. While they recognized that "vicious crimes" had been committed they did not think that this threatened the legitimacy of their unifying framework. Rather, they saw the Bill of Rights as the vehicle whereby crimes against civil rights could be minimized and inclusion in public memory and public participation maximized. Using this inclusive framework, they ascribed significance to those things that integrated groups and individuals into the "ongoing political structure—the public sphere—with its attendant schedule of benefits and rewards" (Elshtain, 1981. p. 228).

Next to this unifying and legitimating framework, however, students maintained an alternative story in which private prejudices and, sometimes, public policies worked against inclusion and thwarted the promise of the Bill of Rights. All students knew from personal experience that prejudice existed despite the ideal of equality, that sexism existed despite the

extension of political rights, and that some events could not be reconciled with images of progress. Unfortunately, they had no overarching framework to help them make sense of these things. This should not be surprising. The complexity of America's heritage in regard to race, gender, labor and economics—all elements in the issues that most confused the students—provides a challenge to adults as well. In addition, neither official nor vernacular history provided most students with a coherent framework for understanding the place of dissent or protest in American history. All students appeared to accept the legitimacy of the dissent and protest that culminated in the American Revolution, and African American students had a richer vernacular history that included such elements in the more recent past, but overall, students were less knowledgeable about or comfortable with other forms of civil dissent. Nonetheless, students of all racial groups maintained faith in the image of an idea of expanding rights and progress. They were reasonably confident that Americans could (and should) more fully realize these aspirations, although they sometimes doubted that things would ever be "perfect." They also expressed interest in exactly those areas of ambiguity that most confused them—and with which they had the least experience in school.

These historical omissions in the curriculum are significant, for schools participate in creating public memory whether they intend to or not. From our perspective, it is not the task of teachers to transmit official history uncritically—nor to celebrate vernacular history uncritically—but to help children discover history that is useful and relevant to their lives. History of this kind can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the perception of progress (like that shared by the students in our study) provides an image of hope for the future, but it often ignores both current scholarship and long-standing problems and thus teaches "the mistaken lesson of complacency" (Cmiel, 1994). Americans, of course, are not the only society to fall into this trap. As one commentator noted of the British, they "know about the uglier episodes: the slave trade, the worse bits of imperialism, the

appeasement of Hitler, the bombing of Dresden and, yes, even the Irish potato famine. But little shame attaches to these blemishes. They can be overlooked in the great, grand sweep of achievement of this happy breed of men. All in all, whatever the shortcomings of modern Britain, its past is a pretty splendid affair" ("Uses and abuses of history," 1996, p 72).

An emphasis on the lack of progress, on the other hand, can slip into "a steady corrosive cynicism" that may leave students unable and unwilling to use the "grand contributions" to demand redress for the "vicious crimes." Appiah & Gutmann (1996) note that "those of us who have been disappointed by this nation's repeated unwillingness to extend the promise of democracy and freedom to blacks and other racial minorities must never lose faith in this flawed system that nevertheless remains...better than all the available alternatives" (p. 28–29). The challenge, it seems to us, is to introduce students to the richer complexities of the past within a context that provides some framework for making critical sense out of both legitimating stories and alternative, vernacular histories—and to decide for themselves whether the system is better than the available alternatives or not.

To begin with, children need to recognize that even the most inclusive images always serve some perception of current need and are always human constructions (Cohen, 1994; Kammen, 1991; Novick, 1989). As groups and individuals reconstruct their past, for instance, some parts may be repressed for a time while others are recollected, but as time goes by, memories resurface and the past is reconfigured. This is an active and often contested process with which children should be familiar. One way to help students build a framework that accounts for ambiguity is through letting them grapple with exactly those issues that have not been so thoroughly digested that their meaning is firmly established in the historical canon. Issues of race, gender and class are compelling exactly because they are not solved and because they most directly touch children's lives—thus a strong case could be made that such controversial historical issues should form a central component of

the curriculum (Hunt & Metcalf, 1955). Avoiding history that is within the living memory of children and of the people with whom they come in contact does not meet students' needs. Indeed, such avoidance means that neither public memory nor vernacular history are likely to be critically examined, and that students will be left with inadequate intellectual tools with which to examine the constantly shifting uses of history in their lives. By making questions of significance an explicit part of their instruction, on the other hand, teachers can provide a forum for student talk about history and a framework for making sense out of these different images of the past (Levstik & Barton, 1997; Seixas, 1997). To the extent that they do so, history can become a compelling part of the curriculum and an important part of children's civic education.

Appendix A

Materials

Materials consisted of twenty laminated photocopies and accompanying captions, as described below:

Hernando de Soto, a Spanish explorer, met a number of Indian tribes during the first European expedition to reach the Mississippi River. Explorers came to the Americas in search of land and resources. The Native Americans were forced to give up their lands and their ways of life. [Picture of de Soto and Spanish sailors in a small ship, Native Americans looking on from shore]

The first Thanksgiving in New England was celebrated in Plymouth less than a year after the Plymouth colonists had settled in America in 1620. In the early Fall of 1621, Governor William Bradford arranged a harvest festival to give thanks to God for the progress the colony had made. [Picture of Pilgrims praying at a table, with Native Americans seated in background]

The American Revolution (1775–1783) was fought between Great Britain and its 13 colonies that lay along the Atlantic Ocean in North America. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, in which the colonies declared their freedom from British rule. On September 3, 1783, Britain signed the Treaty of Paris by which it recognized the independence of the United States. [Picture of delegates at the Continental Congress]

The Bill of Rights is a document attached to the Constitution that describes the fundamental rights of the people. They protect a person's right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It also forbids the government to violate these rights. The Bill came into effect on December 15, 1791. [Picture depicting "Liberty," crowned by an American flag, with a list of the "four freedoms" in the background]

On January 1, 1863, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This historic document was one step towards the end of slavery in the United States. [Picture of Abraham Lincoln and advisors]

Western frontier life represented the dreams of homesteaders, who crossed the plains to Oregon or California in wagons. Their back–breaking labor turned the barren plains into fields of grain. The western farmer's land has been called the sod–house frontier, because so many settlers built homes of dirt and sod. [Photograph of two women and children in front of sod house]

Thomas Edison's greatest invention was the electric light bulb. Many other people had been working upon the idea for years. Edison wanted lights that were small enough to be used in homes and offices. On October 19, 1879, after many failures, Edison finally succeeded in making a light bulb that used sewing thread as a filament. [Photograph of Edison in a workshop]

The demand for public education increased in the United States during the early 1800's. People saw that a nation's economic and social well–being depended on educated citizens. After 1850, states began to pass compulsory school attendance laws. These laws required

children to attend school until they completed a certain grade or reached a certain age. [photograph of classroom and students, circa 1900]

Immigration is the act of coming to a foreign country to live. Millions of European immigrants streamed into the United States during the 1800's and early 1900's. Ellis Island, in New York Harbor, was the main reception center for immigrants from 1892 to 1924. [Immigrants on dock with city skyline in background]

On December 17, 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright, invented and built the first successful airplane. Here, Wilbur looks on as his brother flies their plane for the first time. That first flight lasted 12 important seconds. [Photograph of first airplane]

The issue of suffrage (the right to vote) became increasingly important to women during the 1800's. In 1920, the United States adopted the 19th Amendment to the Constitution granting American women the right to vote. [Photograph of women casting ballots, circa 1920s]

The development of the car gave people freedom of movement which led to rapid changes in American society. Automotive production provided jobs for millions of workers and the widespread use of cars became vital to our economy. [Photograph of a row of parked cars on a city street, circa 1920's]

Depression is a long, serious slump in business activity. Buying and selling drop, causing a decline in production, prices, income and employment. Money becomes scarce. The worst depression in history was the Great Depression, which struck the world in 1929 and continued through the 1930's. [Photograph of woman and two children during Depression]

World War II (1939–1945) brought about the downfall of Western Europe as the center of world power and led to the rise of the Soviet Union. The development of the atomic bomb during the war opened the nuclear age. The United States entered the war on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked American military bases at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. [Photograph of destroyed ships enveloped in smoke]

Polio was one of the most feared diseases until Jonas Salk developed an effective vaccine against it in 1953. In the past, polio epidemics were common and many of its victims were left paralyzed for life. Today, Salk's vaccine has eliminated this serious infection in nearly all the developed countries in the world. [Photographs of Salk, person using crutches, and microscopic enlargement of disease virus]

The Civil Rights Movement began after WW II. African Americans had served with honor in the war yet were still discriminated against and treated unfairly. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the recognized leader of the movement. He urged African Americans to use peaceful means, such as marches and demonstrations, to achieve their rights and goals. [photograph of Martin Luther King, Jr., leading other African Americans in a protest march]

The rock 'n' roll explosion began with Elvis Presley in the 1950's. Rock 'n' roll had its roots in many forms of previous music, such as rhythm and blues and country. By the 1960's Elvis had paved the way for groups like the *Beatles*, who were one of the most popular rock groups of all time. [Advertising poster for Presley concert]

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The Vietnam War (1957—1975) was the longest war in which the United States took part. Americans disagreed about U. S. involvement there and this became one of the most debated issues in our nation's history. North Vietnam and South Vietnamese rebels fought to take over South Vietnam. The U. S. and the South Vietnamese army tried to stop them but failed. [Photograph of armed soldiers and prisoners wading through water]

The advent of the computer marked a technological revolution as the machines simplified many difficult and time–consuming tasks. Computers provide an efficient way to manage large amounts of information and are a means of communication and information exchange. Computers can quickly and accurately solve numerical problems, store and retrieve information, and create and display documents and pictures. [Photograph of man and woman working near a computer monitor]

Did he or didn't he? Millions of people watch their television sets and wonder where the truth might lie. Did O. J. Simpson kill Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman? It is the media event of 1994—95. [Portion of a newsmagazine cover with photographs of O. J. and Nicole Brown Simpson]

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Have you ever seen a timeline like this in your classroom or in books? Do you know what they're for? (Show blank timeline. If necessary, explain that a timeline is a way of showing some important things in history and when they happened.) This is a timeline of the last 500 years, and these are pictures from different times. Each one has a caption that explains a little about it. You're going to work together as a group to decide which of these are important enough to put on the timeline. You can only pick 8, so you have to decide which are the most important. After you've decided on the eight most important ones, I'll ask you to explain each of your choices. Do you have any questions before you start? Remember, when you start, you'll need to read the captions on each one, and then talk to each other about which ones you think are important enough to put on the timeline and why.

After students complete task, ask:

1. Why did you choose this one [point to each]?
2. Which pictures do you think other people might have picked, and why?
3. Are there any pictures that you don't think anyone would pick? Why?
4. [Point to any pictures not mentioned] Can you think of any reason someone might have included this one?
5. Is there anything in history that's not on any of these pictures that you think should have been included?
6. If a group of [opposite sex: girls/boys] were doing this, do you think they would make any choices different than you did?
7. If little kids, like third or fourth graders, were doing this, what do you think might be different about their choices?
8. If older people, like your parents' or grandparents' ages, were doing this, what do you think might be different about their choices?
9. What are the most important things about history that you've learned in school, and why do you think they're important? What are the least important things you've learned about history in school, and why don't you think they're as important?
10. What are the most important things about history you've learned outside of school?

Appendix C

Grade Level of Students

All names listed below are pseudonyms.

Girls, Grade 5
Laniesha
Whitney
Yolanda

Boys, Grade 5
Dustin
Ryan
JaJuan

Girls, Grade 6

Group 1	Group 2
Leslie	Miatta
Michelle	Tania
Amber	Megan
	Jessica

Boys, Grade 6

Group 1	Group 2
Israel	Jacob
Cole	Oliver
Brandon	Derek
	Robert

Girls, Grade 7

Group 1	Group 2
Jaclyn	Kathy
Tiffany	Sonja
Briana	Rhiannon
	Patricia

Boys, Grade 7

Group 1	Group 2
Reuben	Asher
Ron	Jared
Lewis	Peter
	Fred

Girls, Grade 8

Group 1	Group 2
Katrina	Isabella
Nicole	Sylvia
Brenda	Saara
	Rachel

Boys, Grade 8

Group 1	Group 2
J. R.	Thomas
Chad	Tony
Donny	Lincoln
	Byron

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